VISIT…

AMERICAN FAMILY OF THE COLONIAL ERA

PAPER DOLLS IN FULL COLOR

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THE COLONIAL ERA

In order to depict accurately the wide range of costumes worn during America's Colonial period, I have created the eight paper dolls seen on Plates 1–3. These dolls portray an entire Colonial family, and I have dressed them in clothes that represent four different situations in which such a family might have been found.

Grandparents Samuel and Hannah are relatively well-to-do; they have acquired some land and money, and live quite comfortably. Parents John and Prudence are a couple dealing with the everyday struggle of raising and feeding their four children, 18-year-old Benjamin, 15-year-old Sarah, Ruth, 6 years old, and Thomas, age 2.

Plate 1. Sarah's chemise often doubles as a "lounging" or "morning" dress. Her red shoes of silk brocade are very fashionable for young ladies of this period. Ruth wears a chemise with tucked sleeves and an Empire-type waist—a popular style in children's wear. Her little brother Thomas wears a shirt and diapers; because of a shortage of pins during the Revolution, the diapers are tied in place. Benjamin wears drawers of natural linen with stockings and shoes; the opening in the trousers is called a front fall.

Plate 2. Mother Prudence is 35 years old. She wears a laced corset with panniers (a hooped framework designed to give width to the gowns of this period; the hoops were of cane, whalebone or wire) over a muslin camisole which also doubles as a nightgown. The corset and shoes are both of embroidered damask. Father John is 38 years old. A soft shirt is worn with footed drawers of red flannel. The legs are separate pieces and are joined at the waistband. The small gathers at the waist and a drawstring at the back give the proper fit.

Plate 3. Grandfather Samuel is 57 years old. His softly bloused top doubles as both shirt and undershirt in addition to being a nightshirt. The drawers are of natural, soft linen; the straight-cut legs are wrapped around and tied at the knee to accommodate knee breeches. At 54, Grandmother Hannah demonstrates the fact that there is no clear-cut definition for underwear in the Colonial period—her laced corset is made of the same fabric as her gown (see Plate 12) and has removable sleeves that tie in place. Oval hoops are sewn into a red flannel skirt to create panniers.

The first group of costumes (Plates 4–6) will dress the family in traditional working-class garb. Working-class clothes were made of coarsely woven fabrics, often homespun, and were devoid of embroidered buttonholes, ruffles, lace and other embellishments. In color, the garments were generally drab; brown was the most easily obtained dyestuff during this time. Many German immigrants settled in the Hudson Valley, Pennsylvania, the Carolinas and Virginia, imparting a German influence to the clothes. Throughout Europe, farmers had worn the smock for generations; they brought it with them to America and it was common throughout the land until after the Civil War. Farmers' wives and daughters wore shorter skirts to facilitate their work.

Plate 4. Sarah's simple bodice closes with hook fasteners down the front. The sleeves are pleated at the cuffs to curve with the arm. She wears knitted mitts for warmth, but they are fingerless to allow for movement. The apron she wears is pinned in place (thus the name "pinafore" developed). Benjamin wears a blue smock with knicker trousers and striped stockings, which are common at this time. He wears a bandanna neckerchief and wide-brimmed felt hat. Ruth wears a simple dress without sleeves; her chemise sleeves are pushed up to the elbow and she wears a kerchief at her neck and an apron tied about her waist. Thomas wears a coat with an apron. The apron is a square yard of fabric, cut off at the top corners to make a bib; it is attached to his coat button with a buttonhole and is belted with a leather cord.

Plate 5. Prudence is dressed as a farmer's wife in an outfit showing German influence. Her bodice is attached to the corset and decorated with ribbon; elbow-length sleeves have shaped cuffs. Her gauze apron is for "dress-up" and is held on by a cloth belt. Her red turned-up shoes are highly prized by rural folk. John's work clothes are of homespun cloth in dark colors; the shirt has a dropped shoulder, popular well into the nineteenth century; there is probably a ruffle at the cuff which is worn folded inside for everyday wear. He wears a flat felt hat and carries a powder horn and a shoulder pouch containing shells.

Plate 6. Samuel is wearing a brocade banian over a waistcoat and knee breeches; the waistcoat is open for ventilation. The banian, extremely popular with men of all ages during the 1750s–1770s, is worn at gatherings or in public for dining and drinking occasions. A tam-o'-shanter is worn when Samuel's wig is off (sometimes in winter he wears a fur cap). Hannah's brown linen dress (consisting of corset, sleeves, chemise and skirt) is layered with a bodiced overskirt of gauze as well as a large kerchief of embroidered and ribboned gauze. Hannah wears a mobcap of sheer white lawn with lace trim and a pink taffeta ribbon. Her fan is Chinese and her fingerless gloves are of brown lace—she is the picture of a well-to-do farmer's wife.

The second group of costumes (Plates 7–9) changes the dolls into a middle-class family during the Revolution. Although a few militia companies had uniforms, the chief uniforms during the early years of the war were smocks and hunting clothes; regiments from different areas were distinguished by different colors. Regarding women's clothes, by the time of the Revolution, the sacque or "Watteau" gown (worn by Prudence in Plate 8) was old-fashioned in Europe; however, owing to the cost and scarcity of imported silks and fancy fabrics, American women nursed their dresses into extended service through the end of the Revolution. American women defied Mother England even before their men did. To raise taxes, the King had decreed that though Americans could grow flax and wool, spin and dye it, the fibers must be shipped to England to be woven into cloth and then

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sold back to them. In defiance, women wove their own cloth, and it is said that the first drumbeat of the Revolution was the "bump-bump" of the women's looms.

Plate 7. Young Benjamin has joined the militia and wears a linen hunting shirt with double fringed collars for extra protection during wet and cold weather; every seam in the shirt is covered with fringe to prevent water from penetrating the seams. He is wearing regular knee breeches, but his shins are covered by Indian leather leggings held up by beaded and fringed garters. He wears a leather ammunition pack. Sarah is wearing a silk faille bodice with a matching green overskirt pulled up toward the back (a forerunner of the bustle) over a printed cotton petticoat. Her chemise shows at the neck and sleeves. Ruth's cotton dress features shirring on the sleeves and a center panel of shirring on the bodice. Thomas' coat is brown wool with red silk trim; he wears a tan cotton dress over a white shirt and a soft felt hat with a pink plume.

Plate 8. John is wearing an Army officer's uniform in the colors of Virginia: a dark blue coat with red lapels and lining. His hat is notable because it is the new bicorne or two-cornered hat. Prudence is wearing the sacque or "Watteau" gown with a shirred border at the front opening and on the sleeves and turban. The seams in this full gown's waist area could be let out, converting it into a maternity garment quite easily; after the baby was born and the mother had recovered her figure, the seams could be restitched.

Plate 9. During the Revolution, Samuel calls upon his experiences as a young sailor to become a privateer for the new Continental Navy. Although there are no official Navy uniforms, privateer officers dress in the formal uniforms of military officers. Hannah is wearing a linen dress with a divided skirt; the front opening is bordered along each side with crewel-embroidered panels. The bodice is laced over the chemise in a zigzag pattern. The sleeves of the bodice are quite short, revealing fitted chemise sleeves. The petticoat is quilted and decorated with crewel embroidery; quilted petticoats are popular because of the lack of central heating in the homes.

In Plates 10–12, the family is dressed in the garments worn by the upper-middle class near the end of the Revolution. The bright colors and fine fabrics and trims used to make the women's clothes reflect the return to happier times. At this time in Europe there were rumblings of a revolution in dress. The Macaroni Club, a group in England comparable to today's jet set, took fashion to the extremes of silliness, including outsized buttons and buttonholes, large cuffs, skin-tight breeches and silly little hats. It was this fashion that brought on the parody of Yankee Doodle – "put a feather in his cap and called it macaroni." These fashions filtered through to America and adaptations were worn by the men as shown in Plates 10–12.

Plate 10. Children's clothes closely followed those of the adults during this time. Benjamin's formal coat has the large cuffs characteristic of this period; it is different from other styles in that it has a small standup collar. His coat and trousers are of purple ottoman; the vest is mauve with silver brocade. Sarah's dress is of printed linen; the bodice is fitted over a corset in front, fullness in back gives a cape-like appearance. The skirt is shorter than that of an older woman. Ruth wears a yellow silk print dress; her camisole forms a ruffle at the neck and sleeves. Her apron and cap are of soft white linen. Thomas' outfit shows that boys do not wear trousers until they are out of diapers and completely dry; Thomas wears a coat of brown and oxblood-red velvet. The ribbon around his neck also holds his back curls in place.

Plate 11. Prudence wears a dress of imported silk. The bodice is worn over a matching corset and joins at the center front with concealed hooks; the elbow-length sleeves have a ruffle that is worn turned back. Her hair is "creped" and powdered (to crepe, the hair was tightly curled with an iron, then teased out until it stood quite high); the back of her hair is worn in large spiral curls. She wears a small cap, or fontange, of ecru and white lace. John's formal suit is of blue satin with silver trim buttons; the waistcoat is of a pale blue silk taffeta with elaborate ribbon and silver-embroidered trim. His shoes have a modified tongue treatment, but he wears the ubiquitous silver buckles that are a status symbol.

Plate 12. Samuel's formal suit is of green velvet with silver braid and silver buttons. The large pocket flaps, quite in vogue, are worn high. The waistcoat is purposely left open over the stomach for ventilation and a place to rest the hand (or even warm it!); sometimes the cravat is pulled through this opening. His hose are of dark gray wool and are worn with black shoes with a large tongue flap and silver buckle. Hannah's corset (see Plate 3) now has the sleeves tied in place and the ribbons tucked and hidden. A "busk," a wedge-shaped piece of wood covered with cloth, has been slipped in the bodice front to hide the corset lacings. The skirt is tied on around the waist; tabs on the bottom of the corset help to stabilize it. The lace at the sleeves and neck are part of her chemise—the chemise neck is shaped by a drawstring to conform with the shape of the corset, and the edging is carefully arranged.

In Plates 13–15, the family has separated after the Revolution. Samuel has entered politics and become a judge, and the younger couple are moving west to establish a land claim. For traveling by wagon, the children and women usually walked alongside while the men drove the team. Few clothes but the ones they wore were taken, and those had to be practical and durable.

Plate 13. Sarah wears a simple dress with fitted sleeves, and a pinafore with a large pocket for carrying the herbs and berries she might pick as she walks. Her stole is a keepsake quilt she made from scraps of material given to her by friends and relations from home. Benjamin wears his farmer outfit with the addition of full-length Indian leggings and moccasins. The younger children are dressed in simple homespun attire. Ruth carries a precious scarf given to her by her grandmother. Thomas carries a small bow and arrow.

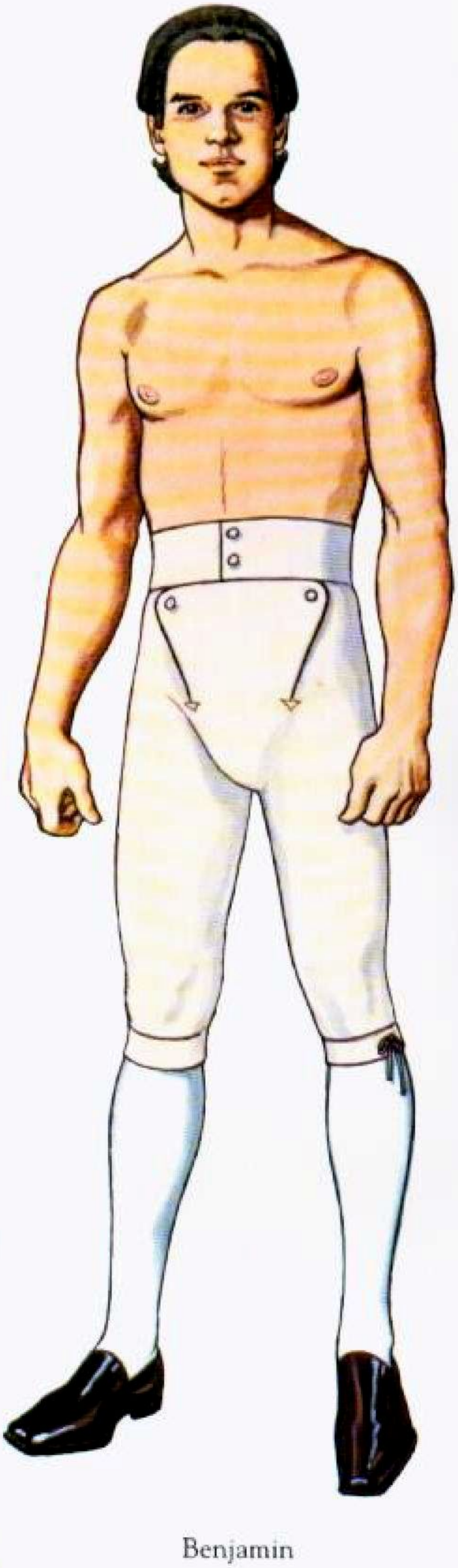
Plate 14. Prudence wears a woolen cape for protection from the elements. Her corset is cut low (a practical style for nursing babies) and is filled out with her chemise. She wears a narrow apron and sturdy walking shoes. For traveling, John adopts the Indian-inspired frontier attire worn by hunters and trappers. His garments are of soft leather and he wears Indian moccasins and leggings. His fur hat is decorated with feathers given to him by a friendly Indian.

Plate 15. Samuel wears a judicial robe similar to those worn in England and France by clerics and officials. His white ceremonial wig is similar to wigs still worn today in the English courts. As a judge's wife, Hannah is dressed appropriately. Her dress is of lavender taffeta and the skirt is decorated with ruching of the same fabric; the sleeves are caught with pink velvet garters that are studded with pearls. She wears a matching pink velvet cape caught over one shoulder and pinned to the other.

NOTE: The abbreviations on the clothing tabs indicate for which person the garment is intended: B for Benjamin, R for Ruth, T for Thomas, SR for Sarah, P for Prudence, J for John, SM for Samuel, H for Hannah.

Sarah

Ruth



Benjamin

Thomas

Plate 1

John

Prudence

Plate 2

Samuel

Hannah

Plate 3

SR

B

B

R
T

Plate 5

Plate 6

Plate 7

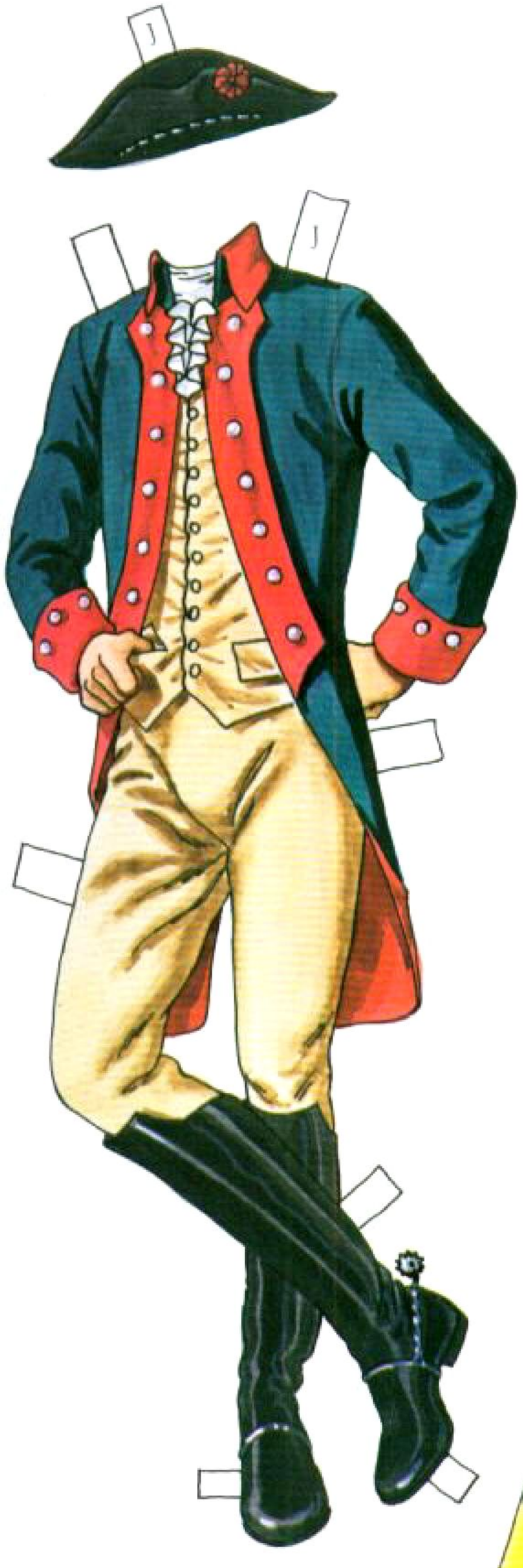
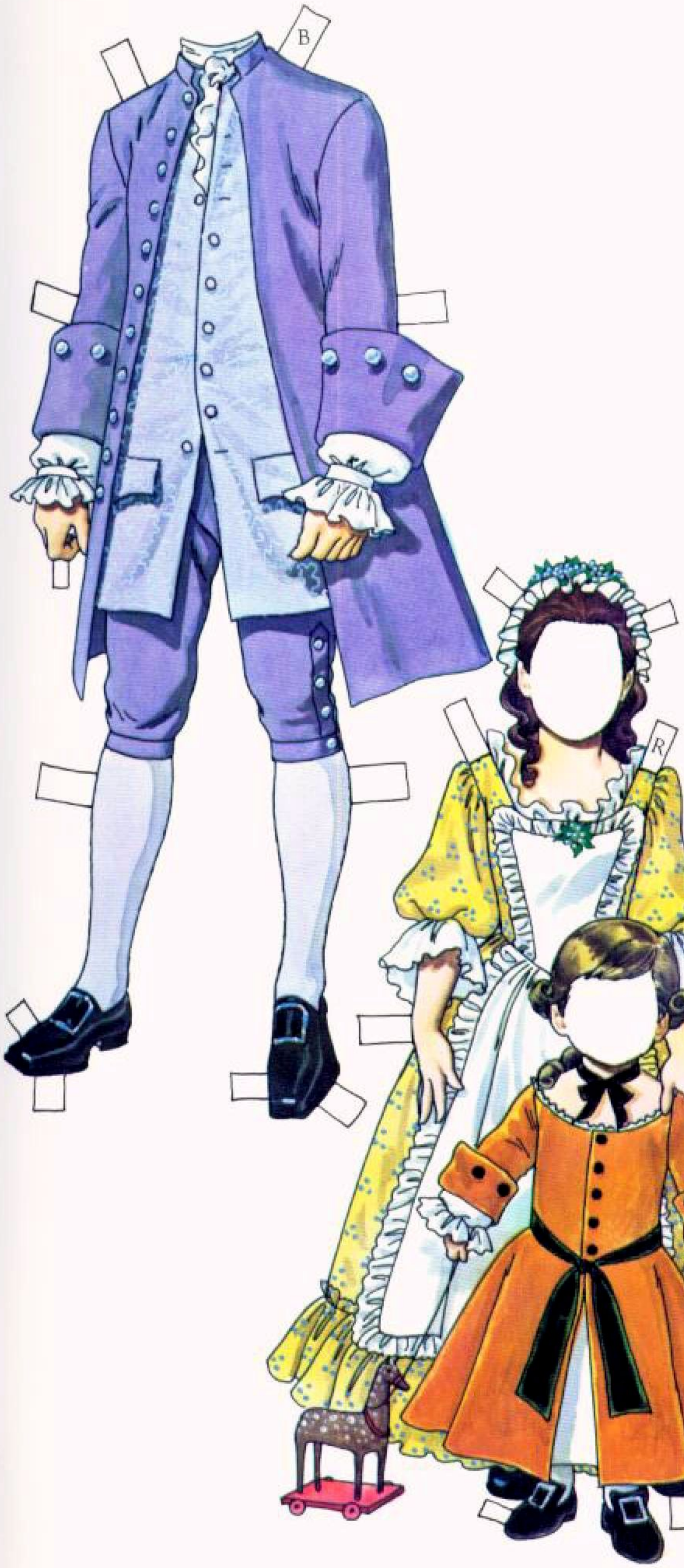


Plate 9

B


B
R
F

SR

Plate 11

SM

H

Plate 13

Plate 1

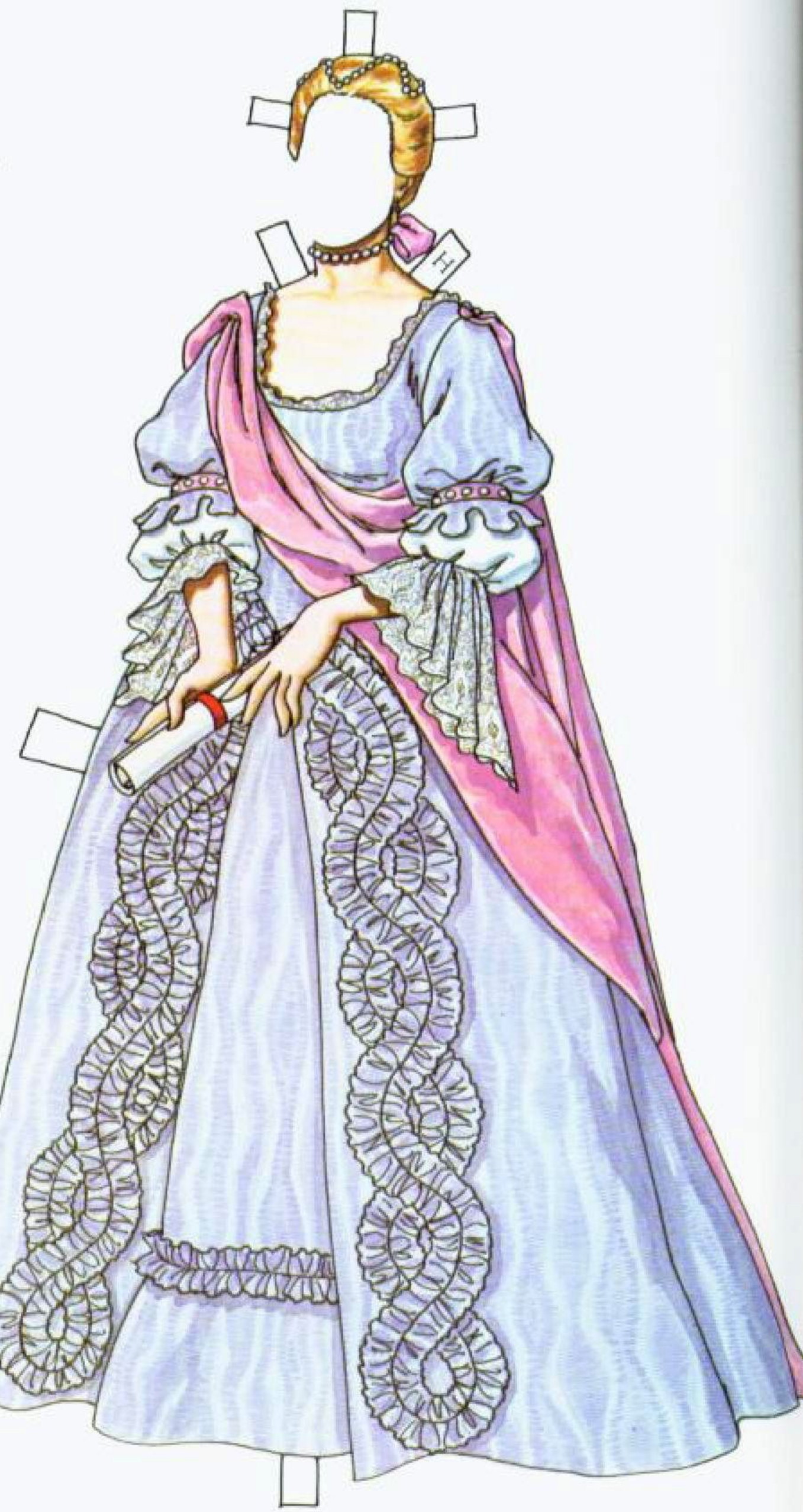


Plate 15